

Leaflet No. 7

THE One Big Union



GENERAL HEADQUARTERS:

Plebs Hall, 54 Adelaide St., Winnipeg

A Historical Sketch

WHY THE O.B.U. STARTED.

Much has been said as to WHY and HOW the O.B.U. came into existence, not only by the various A. F. of L. leaders, but also by the Kept Press, which makes it necessary that we again place before the workers a short review of the developments leading up to the birth of the organization.

CONDITIONS DURING THE WAR YEARS

In spite of the fact that during the period of the great war the labor market was most favorable to the workers (which is amply proven by the fact that the government found it necessary to pass an Order-in-Council authorizing the jailing of any working man found at large without a job) the workers in Western Canada were forced to combine their forces in order to gain a few cents per hour increase in wages. In substantiation of this we draw to your attention the General Sympathetic Strike in Vancouver, B.C.; Edmonton, Alberta; Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Calgary, Alberta, during the years 1917 and 1918. Such combined action on the part of the workers, as above cited, was necessary even when the labor market was most favorable, and without it the workers could not have brought the various disputes to a successful conclusion.

THE LESSON LEARNED

The lesson learned by the workers in Western Canada from these events forced them to bring resolutions before the Trades Congress of Canada Convention, in the city of Quebec, in September, 1918, calling upon the Congress to take a referendum vote on Industrial Unionism. The following resolution,

which is typical of many submitted, will show the psychology of the Western workers at that time:

RESOLUTION A.—BY THE WINNIPEG TRADES AND LABOR COUNCIL:

INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM.—Whereas, in the past the capitalist class have used every means at their disposal to defeat the workers in their attempt to ameliorate the conditions under which they work; and, whereas, the present form of Craft organization leaves us in the position whereby the capitalist class can successfully defeat us in any attempt we may make; therefore, be it resolved, that we call upon the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada to take a referendum vote on the question of organizing the Canadian Labor Movement into a modern and scientific organization by Industry instead of by Craft; be it further resolved that if the first resolution is carried that a committee representative of each industry be appointed to draw up a constitution and submit to the membership.

The refusal of the Congress to allow the Western delegates to discuss this resolution in Convention, resulted in the Western delegates holding a caucus wherein they discussed ways and means to have a large delegation from the West attend the next Congress, in order to express the aspirations of the Western workers. In order to accomplish this it was arranged to hold a convention of Trade Unions, affiliated with the A. F. of L., in the early part of 1919, representing the workers west of the Great Lakes.

WHAT THE CONVENTION ACCOMPLISHED

In March, 1919, the convention met in the city of Calgary, Alberta. There were some 250 delegates present, representing unions and trades councils affiliated with the A. F. of L. west of the Great Lakes to the Pacific coast on the Canadian side of the border. The reports of the delegates were almost unanimous in the desire of their organizations to bring about a form of organization that corresponded to the changes that had taken place in industry, which change was caused by the introduction of modern machinery that was fast reducing the once skilled workers to the position of unskilled. The delegates also expressed their dissatisfaction with the A. F. of L. form of organization, which gives control to the officers regardless of the rank and file and thus hinders the progress of the workers. Finally it was decided to take a referendum vote on the question of forming a One Big Union of wage-earners with a common membership card.

HOW THE RANK AND FILE ACTED

The referendum, when placed before the membership, was carried by an overwhelming vote and another convention was held, as provided for by the result of the vote, to draft the constitution. This was done in June, 1919, and the first membership card was issued in the month of July, 1919.

ASSAILED FROM EVERY ANGLE

Representatives of the government, employers, editors of the Kept Press, and reactionary Labor officials of the A. F. of L., ever since the inception of the new organization, have done everything possible to discredit the movement. Stories were spread that the O.B.U. was responsible for the WINNIPEG STRIKE; that the O.B.U. was one thing today and the next day they would contradict themselves by accusing the O.B.U. of standing for something else. Such were, and still are, the tactics adopted by our various opponents. But still the organization continues to increase in power and in membership.

WHY WE GROW

The reason for the wonderful growth of the O.B.U. is that the old Craft Union methods are no longer effective in securing improved conditions for the workers; in fact, they have failed to maintain the standard of living in the face of the improved methods of production, labor-saving machinery, etc. The workers organized in the Craft Unions spend a great deal of their energy in fighting each other because of Craft strikes and jurisdictional fights.

CRAFT UNION POLICY

Jurisdictional scraps are caused by two or more unions quarrelling over whose members shall do a certain class of work. Where the workers are all members of the One Big Union this question does not arise.

One of the most important policies of the Craft Unions affiliated with the A. F. of L. is trade, or craft, autonomy; for example, there are seventeen different Trade Unions affiliated with the Building Trades' Department of the American Federation of Labor. Each of these unions has jurisdiction over a certain section of the building trades, each makes its own agreement with the employers, and usually when one union is on strike the other unions stay at work, thus helping to break the strike. Those staying at work have contracts with the employer that expire at different dates and their contracts are used as excuses to prevent them from coming to the assistance of the union in difficulty.

The American Federation of Labor is in the same position as a general, who, seeing his infantry being destroyed, would refuse to bring up his cavalry and artillery, and other divisions of the army to their assistance, and would give as a reason that he had an agreement with the enemy not to use more than one division of his army at a time. That typifies the tactics of the A. F. of L.

CHANGED METHODS OF PRODUCTION

In the days gone by, when the skilled craftsman produced an article by himself largely by hand work, the craft union organization correctly reflected his interests on the job, but with the introduction of modern methods of production the skilled worker has been reduced to a large extent to the position of a machine tender or specialist, who contributes but one or two operations in the production of the finished article. Thus we see the shoemaker, who formerly produced a complete pair of shoes by hand labor, today tends a machine in a factory with hundreds of fellow-workers, through whose hands each shoe passes before it is complete.

In the Building Trades where a few years ago the carpenters used to erect a house by their own efforts, now it requires the services of from fifteen to twenty specialists to erect a modern dwelling.

With these specialists divided between seventeen or more different trade unions, it is quite easy for the employer to defeat any one of them at any time, even though those union men who remain on the job do not do the work of the union on strike.

In a modern bakery today most of the work in connection with the production of bread is done by machinery (in fact some bakeries advertise that human hands never touch the bread at all), and such a bakery can be operated by unskilled labor, with one or two bakers in charge.

It is, therefore, obvious, that if the Bread Wagon Drivers (members of the International Brotherhood Teamsters & Chauffeurs' Union) deliver scab bread when the Bakers (members of the International Bakery and Confectionery Workers' Union) are on strike, that the employers will be able to defeat them both by using one against the other.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATION— THE NEED OF TODAY

The sectional needs of the workers today may differ according to the nature of their employment, as will be seen by the following illustrations:

The workers employed on the Railroads of the country, for instance, need an Industrial form of organization, because the railroad workers in Eastern Canada need the assistance of the railroad workers in Western Canada during times of trouble with the employers. THIS IS THE INDUSTRIAL PERSPECTIVE.

The workers on the Street Railway, for instance, in a given city during the time of trouble with the boss, depend upon the support of the workers in that city, because they are the only ones who can give them the necessary assistance. In other words, what good could the Street Railway workers in another city or even ten other cities render by coming out on strike in their support? Surely it is clear that the assistance of all the workers in the given

city or district is the only thing that would count. THIS IS THE GEOGRAPHICAL PHASE. The application of the above two illustrations to the various industries will determine the needs of the workers in any given industry. While, therefore, we stand for Industrial Organization, we recognize the necessity of having a form of organization which gives us the highest degree of the Industrial Organization plus location.

STATE INTERVENTION IN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES

There is another factor in Industrial disputes of any size that we must take into consideration and that is the "State." In almost every dispute of any size, immediately the workers drop their tools we find the State stepping in, either in the guise of City, Provincial, or Federal authority. It does so usually in the garb of a neutral or third party, but ultimately throws its weight on the side of the employer. The Winnipeg General Strike, the Steel and Coal Miner's strikes of the United States, the Miners' strike in France, the Metal Workers' strike in Italy, and Nova Scotia Steel Workers' strike are clear enough illustrations of this.

If we have learned anything from the above struggles, surely it is the fact that we can no longer hope to fight successfully when divided into 100 or more separate Craft Unions. It is clear that our only hope for success lies in building up an organization that seeks to weld the workers into a ONE BIG UNION of wage workers, irrespective of nationality, sex or craft. Only by so doing can we combat the One Big Union of the bosses.

HOW THE O.B.U. FUNCTIONS

Therefore the workers are organized in the O.B.U. into local units, covering certain occupations or industries according to the wish of the membership, and each local unit has control of its own local affairs and funds.

All the local units in a city or district elect representatives to a Central Labor Council or District Board, and these Councils or Boards have control of the affairs of the O.B.U. in their respective districts; therefore, while each unit has control of its own business, when any condition arises that concerns the members of other units, or is liable to involve them in a strike, then the business is handled by the entire membership concerned through the Central Labor Council or District Board.

A strike cannot be called except by vote of the membership.

The membership have the power to recall their officers at any time.

The common membership card makes for greater working-class solidarity.

You do not have to pay a new initiation fee every time you change your occupation.

Join The One Big Union TO-DAY

ISSUED BY THE
Publicity Committee, One Big Union